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Young Rough Riders Weekly

MOST FASCINATING WESTERN STORIES

TED STRONG'S TERRIBLE TEST

OR Joining A Secret Clan

BY NED TAYLOR

"You are to kill the girl before you with that knife. This will be your test. If your first thrust penetrates her heart, you will be considered perfect. Be ready."

The Young Rough Riders Weekly

Most Fascinating Western Stories

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TED STRONG'S TERRIBLE TEST;

OR,

JOINING A SECRET CLAN.

By NED TAYLOR.

CHAPTER I.

KIDNAPED.

The scene which opens this story is in the little town of Soccoro, in the State of Coahuila, Mexico.

The time is close to midnight during the month of September, several years ago.

Stopping at the one hotel of the town were four persons, with whom the readers of this library are familiar. They were Ted Strong, Bud Morgan, Ben Tremont and Bob Martin.

Ted Strong, famous all over the country as the successful manager of the Los Animas Cattle Ranch of southern and western Texas, and organizer and manager of a company of young men known as the young rough riders, had been transacting some business of an important nature in old Mexico.

With his three companions, all well-known and popular members of his band of rough riders, he had succeeded in finding a herd of valuable cattle, which had been stolen from the Los Animas Ranch and driven down into Mexico. After regaining possession of these cattle Ted had sold the whole herd to a Mexican ranchman at a fancy figure, and the four were now ready to start for home the next morning.

Ted, in his search for the cattle, had found them in the possession of a bandit band known as the Demons of Coahuila. This band was under the leadership of a beautiful, young, Mexican girl by the name of Anita.

During his adventures Ted had fallen into the hands of the bandits, and Anita, who had at first determined to take his life, finally fell violently in love with the young rough rider and saved him.

Of course, Ted did not reciprocate Anita's love, but he tried to influence the girl to give up her wicked life and reform. The girl had announced her determination to carry out Ted's suggestion, and, by appointment, had appeared in Soccoro that day to make the journey with the rough riders when they started for Texas.

While in search of the stolen cattle, Ted and his companions had run across two young men from Michigan, Ralph Hobart and Max Morton, who had come to Mexico to search for a valuable treasure buried in a certain place in the mountains by the Aztec Indians many years before. The young rough riders had helped Hobart and

Morton to find the treasure, and the two boys were now at the hotel in Soccoro, intending to accompany the rough riders to the Los Animas Ranch and to visit that ranch for a week or two.

Ted Strong and his party of companions and friends all retired early this night, for they wished to get a good rest, expecting to travel a good, long distance the following day toward home.

The hotel, built partly of adobe and partly of wood, was two stories in height, but there were several sleeping rooms on the ground floor.

The men of the party all slept upstairs, but for Anita a room on the ground floor was prepared.

During the evening the Mexican girl, who had for several years led an exciting, adventurous life in the mountains, as leader of the dreaded band of bandits, talked gayly and hopefully of the new life ahead for her, and Ted felt certain that she was sincere.

Although he had caught her on several occasions looking at him with wistful eyes, she had said nothing of a sentimental nature since arriving at the hotel that day.

Ted's mind was puzzled over Anita, however. She was an enigma to him. While the girl had seemed sincere in her anxiety to forsake her evil ways, Ted was not certain, even now, but that she was acting a part.

Was it not perhaps because she hoped eventually to gain his love, rather than because of a desire to lead a different kind of a life, that the Mexican girl, ex-queen of the band of desperadoes, had consented to accompany the rough riders to Texas?

It was the hope of the young rough rider that the girl was really sincere in her confessed desire to reform. At any rate, until he was certain that she was hypocritical, Ted resolved to place no obstacles in her way.

For a long time after the young rough rider had gone to bed these and other thoughts along the same line filled his mind. His thoughts kept him awake, and he heard the old Spanish clock in the hotel office strike the hours of ten, eleven and twelve.

Then Ted tried to relieve his mind of his thoughts. He wanted to get to sleep.

As the clock struck twelve and he realized how late it was getting, he straightened out his pillow, turned over in bed to a more comfortable position and shut his eyes, resolved to dispel his wakeful thoughts and court sleep as quickly as possible.

But sleep had not responded to his coaxings, when his ear suddenly caught the sound of a human voice outside of the hotel, imitating the hoot of a night owl.

To the uninitiated, or to one who had not studied nature as searchingly as the young rough rider, the imitation of a night owl's hoot would have been taken for the real thing.

It was an excellent imitation, but there was a peculiar wavering, a false note. a hesitancy in the sound, or some other little detail which caused Ted Strong to notice the fraud.

Ted was interested.

When he first heard the sound he sat up in bed and listened for a repetition. It came within a few seconds and seemed to be nearer.

Following the repetition of the owl's hoot, Ted's sensitive ear heard a slight sound as of some one moving softly in the room below.

The noise was like the brushing of skirts.

Ted jumped from his bed and approached the window.

It was a warm night, and the window was wide open. It was moonlight.

Ted looked from the window to the ground below.

A surprising sight met his gaze.

The Mexican girl, Anita, fully dressed, was slipping over the sill of her window to the ground outside her room!

As the girl's feet struck the ground, she paused for just an instant, as if undetermined which way to proceed.

Then there came a second repetition of the hooting owl.

Ted now knew that the sound was a secret signal of some sort.

Ted, as well as the girl, noted the direction from which the sound came.

It was from a small piece of wood, the edge of which was but a few rods from the hotel.

As the young rough rider saw the girl trip off daintily and silently toward the piece of woodland, he jumped back from the window, quickly dressed and noiselessly left his room.

He made his way down the stairs and out of the front door of the hotel and then started toward the woods.

He had decided to follow the girl, to discover whom she was about to meet in the forest at that hour of the night.

Her actions had been, so far, decidedly suspicious.

Ted was careful to keep well in the shadows as he approached the woods.

When he gained the timber he felt his way carefully along, stopping every few yards to listen.

Suddenly, stopping thus, he heard the low sounds of the girl's voice, but could not make out her words.

He then started ahead, but had taken only two or three steps, when he was suddenly hit upon the back of the head with some heavy weapon!

He hardly felt the pain, for he was rendered unconscious so quickly.

It was broad daylight when Ted came to his senses. He was then lying upon his back, where he had fallen when so mysteriously attacked.

There was a large lump upon the back of his head and his head ached fearfully.

But he remembered, almost instantly, how he came to be in the woods.

He got to his feet and walked a short distance ahead. He was looking for traces of footsteps to determine how many there had been in the party who had assaulted him.

His trained eyes quickly told him that there had been three men, besides the girl, in the woods near that spot the previous night.

After determining this much, Ted was about to start back toward the hotel, when his eyes caught a glimpse of a piece of dirty paper pinned to a tree trunk not far away.

On examination he found that the paper had been secured in its position by a long, glass-headed hat pin such as he had seen used by Anita.

He took the paper in his hands, and, turning it over, was surprised to find it to be a note, evidently hastily written, addressed to him. It read as follows:

"MR. TED STRONG: I have been kidnaped by three members of the gang of which I was formerly the leader. They refuse to let me leave them. For the love of God, help me to escape! ANITA."

Ted was interrupted, while reading the note, by the appearance of Ben Tremont and Bud Morgan.

They had missed him when they had gotten up that morning and had been searching for him.

In answer to their inquiries he handed to them the note which he had taken from the trunk of the tree.

CHAPTER II.

A STAGE HOLD UP.

"I hardly know what to think about it."

Ted Strong thus spoke.

It was after breakfast, and Ted and his friends had been talking over the mysterious affair of the previous night.

"In her note," Ted continued, "Anita claims to have been kidnaped and held against her will, but, from her actions in the night, it was very evident that she left the hotel and went into the woods, in answer to the owl signal, of her own free will. It also looks, from the fact of her having been fully dressed, that she had been expecting the signal and was prepared to answer it immediately when she heard it."

"What be yer thinking of doing about it?" asked Bud Morgan.

"I think we had better act upon the theory that the girl has actually been carried away against her will," replied Ted.

"And go to her assistance?" asked Bob Martin.

"Yes."

"But, Ted," said Ben Tremont, "perhaps the whole affair is some scheme of the girl's to get you in her power in some way."

"If so I will take chances of outwitting her," returned the young rough rider. "The whole affair is very mysterious, but I cannot bear to let matters rest as they are without an investigation. If the girl really is in trouble it is our duty to help her. If not, we should be able to very soon find it out. I am for investigating the matter, anyway, and I know that you boys will stand by me."

"Yer bet we will!" exclaimed Bud Morgan.

And thus it was settled. The rough riders would go to Anita's assistance, taking a chance that her note to Ted had been written in good faith.

"But," said Ted, "we will keep our eyes wide open. There is one circumstance in this case which seems to be strong evidence that Anita is not being held against her will, and that she was not kidnaped. That is the fact of her having written the note. It seems hardly possible that she would have had an opportunity to write the note and pin it to the tree if she was in the hands of enemies."

Having decided what course to pursue, the rough riders were not long in making their preparations for the trip.

Ralph Hobart and Max Morton signified their desire to accompany the rough riders, and Ted gave his consent.

However, Ted insisted that the jewels and trinkets of value which comprised the treasure of the Aztecs, which they had found, be put in a place of safety before the Easterners started. After some consultation the treasure was packed in a strong box and sent by express to a safety deposit company in Chicago.

Two hours after breakfast the four rough riders and the two Michigan boys were mounting their horses in front of the hotel, ready to take up the trail of the three bandits and Anita.

But, just before Ted gave the order to start, they heard the hoof beats of galloping horses approaching, mingled with the rattle of wheels.

They glanced down the trail and saw a six-horse team being driven rapidly toward the hotel from the south. The horses were hitched to a heavy stagecoach, and the driver was waving his hat and shouting to the mounted men with Ted.

The rough riders waited for the stage to draw up near them, and the first words of the driver aroused their deepest interest.

The driver was an American.

"Fer God's sake, fellers, if yer are real men, I want yer help!" he shouted, almost before he had brought his team to a halt. "Ther stage was held up; all ther express was stole and ther villains kidnaped my passenger!"

"Where did it happen?" asked Ted.

"Eight miles out from here, in Dragon Pass," was the answer.

"Any person killed?"

"No. Not a shot fired."

"Who were the villains? Do you know?"

"Some of ther Coahuila Demons."

"How much did they get away with?"

"Not much money. The express was light. They

didn't seem ter be lookin' fer money, though. It were ther girl they was after."

"A girl?"

"Yes."

"She was the passenger you said had been kidnaped?"

"Yes, ther only passenger I had. She was a swell womern. Purtiest girl I ever seen. And she were dressed ter kill. Rings and jewels all over her fingers and in her hair."

"Tell us all about it," said Ted.

The driver's story was about as follows:

His route was from Monterey to Monclova, and he made a regular trip each way a week. He said that his passenger had taken the stage at the little town of Puerto the previous evening, and had paid fare to the end of his route. She had had but little baggage, and had given no information about herself. Just before dark, she being the only passenger, the driver had crossed the cushions in the stage for the young woman, so that she might sit in a half-reclining position and perhaps get some sleep during the long night ride.

The driver had let his horses out, and the miles were covered at a good rate of speed. Nothing of incident had happened until just at daybreak, when he was driving along at a fast trot through the Dragon Pass.

Then, suddenly and without any warning, seven or eight horsemen appeared in the trail ahead, and, with shouldered rifles, had commanded him to halt.

As soon as the stage had stopped, a part of the hold-up gang had kept him covered, while the others opened the stage door and compelled the girl passenger to alight with her baggage, which consisted of two small satchels.

Then one of the villains went into the bushes at one side of the trail and soon returned with an extra horse. This the girl was made to mount. Then, after securing what few packages of express there were in the stage, the bandits commanded the driver to proceed upon his way.

He said he had lashed his horses nearly all the way to the nearest town on his route, which happened to be Soccoro.

When the man had given Ted these particulars the young rough rider said:

"Get a quick breakfast, my man, and secure a saddle horse. I want you to guide us back to the place where the hold up took place as quickly as possible."

Provisions were made for the care of the stage horses in a nearby stable, and then, while the stage driver was eating a hurried breakfast, Ted and Bud Morgan scoured the town for a saddle horse. This they were lucky to find with little loss of time.

Ted rented the horse and saddle, placing in the hands of the hotel proprietor a sum of money equal to the worth of the animal, as a guarantee of its safe return to its owner.

The party were soon galloping off toward the scene of the stage hold up.

CHAPTER III.

THREE STRANGERS.

"Hold up your horses, boys. Those men want to speak to us."

Ted Strong gave the command.

The four rough riders, with their friends, were riding toward the scene of the recent stage hold up, and had nearly reached the entrance to Dragon Pass, when they saw three men approaching from the direction they were headed.

The three strangers were mounted upon horses which showed evidences of having been ridden long and hard, and they were making motions indicating that they wished to speak with Ted and his friends.

At Ted's command the party of rough riders drew in their reins and came to a halt close to the three strangers.

"Did you wish to speak to us?" asked Ted, addressing a portly-looking man, who seemed to be the leader of the three.

"Yes," was the answer. The portly man had a troubled expression upon his face, and he seemed to be exhausted from his long ride.

Ted sized up the three strangers with a quick glance at each. They were all Americans, apparently.

The portly man appeared to be old enough to be the father of either of the other two. He was dressed in fashionable, English-cut clothing, was quite short, but stout of build, had a round, full face, and large, bulging eyes.

There was something haughty in his bearing and in the tone of his address toward the young rough rider. He spoke as if he was used to being obeyed.

Ted rightly sized him up for a wealthy, city-bred man.

His companions were young fellows, somewhere near thirty years of age. One of them was what might have been called handsome. He was tall, but well proportioned, and was dressed in fashionable, Eastern garments.

This man had piercing, black eyes, black hair, and wore a small, closely trimmed mustache.

But there was a shifting, evil look in the man's eyes, denoting not only shrewdness, but craftiness and deceitfulness.

Ted Strong was not well impressed with this man's looks.

The other young American, while not dressed in the sort of costume worn by Westerners as a rule, wore rather shabby garments.

He wore a blue, flannel shirt, with a loose collar in lieu of a white, laundered shirt such as was worn by each of his companions.

And, in place of a light Panama hat he wore a wide-brimmed sombrero.

He was shorter and a trifle more stockily built than the other young man.

His hair was brown and curly. His face was perfectly smooth, and his eyes, wide open and full of life, were dark blue in color.

His frank, open countenance made an impression of favor with the young rough rider.

As the portly man answered Ted's first question he began dismounting. Then, looking at Ted, he asked:

"Are you the leader of this party?"

Ted answered in the affirmative.

"Have you traveled down this trail all the way from Soccoro to-day?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, you probably have met the stage which was due through here to-day?"

"The stage arrived at Soccoro just before we left there," answered Ted.

As the stranger heard Ted's answer he seemed to become quite excited.

His next question was asked in a nervous, eager voice:

"Did you notice what passengers were in that stage this morning?"

But Ted's answer seemed to throw cold water upon the man's eagerness.

"No passengers rode in the stage when it arrived at Soccoro."

The stranger turned to his companions with a distressed look upon his face.

"She slipped us somewhere, boys. Did you hear what this young man says? There were no passengers in the stage this morning."

Of course, the young rough rider suspected that the three men were following the stage for the purpose of getting track of the young woman who, that morning, had fallen into the hands of the Coahuila Demons.

But Ted was bound to be cautious.

There were two of the three strangers whose looks he did not like.

He wanted to know something about them before he would volunteer any information.

Why were they following the girl? Was it for her good?

Perhaps the girl was trying to get away from these three men when she was captured by the bandits.

Finally, Ted asked the stranger, who had thus far been doing the talking, the reason for his apparent agitation.

"Were you gentlemen trying to catch up with some person whom you thought had taken that stage?" asked Ted.

The corpulent man did not answer at once. He hesitated and seemed debating in his mind whether to take the young rough rider into his confidence or not. But he finally came to a conclusion.

"My daughter was in that stage when it left the little town of Puerto. She willfully left my wife and myself and the parties with whom we were touring Mexico, and disappeared. We are trying to learn her whereabouts."

"Why did she leave?" asked Ted.

There was a look of astonishment upon the stranger's face as he looked up at the young rough rider, on hearing Ted's question.

"Young man," he said, "you presume too much, indeed, in trying such a personal question. Do you think I am going to divulge my family affairs to a perfect stranger?"

Ted flushed. He did not like the man's tones or his words.

"You can do as you please about it," replied Ted. "You have lost your daughter. I might perhaps aid you in finding her. In fact, I am almost certain my friends and myself can locate her within a few hours."

The eager look returned to the stranger's face.

"You think you can find her?"

"Almost certain of it," replied Ted.

"Then go in search of her, quickly. I am rich. If you recognize my name, you know that money is nothing to me. I am Jeremiah Doland, of Philadelphia, broker by occupation. Find my daughter and bring her to me and you may name your own reward."

"We are not in the habit of working for rewards," replied Ted, calmly.

This was another surprise for the stranger, who had spoken as if he thought his offer of money was all that was needed to set Ted and his companions off at a hot pace in search of the missing girl.

The stranger looked at Ted for several moments surprisingly before he seemed to comprehend that the young rough rider had not been impressed with the offer of a monetary reward for finding his daughter.

But at last the stranger spoke again:

"Then, if you won't take money, what inducement can I offer you to make a search for my daughter?"

"A full and complete answer to the one question I asked you, and the same kind of answers to whatever other questions I may ask you about your daughter's strange disappearance," replied Ted.

"And why should I be cross-questioned by you?" asked the man, indignantly.

"And why should I bother my head to look for your daughter?" asked Ted in turn.

"Because I am willing to pay you for it," was the reply.

"There seems little use of arguing the question," said Ted to the self-important stranger. Then to his followers: "Get ready to start along, boys. We can waste no more time here."

But when the young rough rider signified his intention of proceeding upon his way he was detained by Doland:

"Don't get angry with me, young man. I am not in the habit of being dictated to in this way. You must help me find my girl. If she is not found quickly, ruin stares me in the face."

"Financial ruin?" asked Ted.

"Yes," was the man's answer.

Ted could hardly help but show his loathing for this man who, in this hour of trouble, thought of what financial losses his daughter's disappearance might mean to him, instead of being alarmed for his daughter's safety.

"Then you are ready to answer my questions?" asked Ted.

"I will try to do so," was the humiliating answer.

"Very well. You will please tell me, then, what circumstances were responsible for your daughter's sudden departure?"

"Why do you insist upon an answer to that question?" asked Doland.

"Because," replied Ted, boldly, "I suspect that the girl had a good reason for running away from you!"

At this moment the dark-haired young man drew Doland's attention by pulling gently at his elbow.

When the older man turned his head, the tall, young stranger whispered a few words in his ear.

Doland seemed to be impressed with whatever was being said to him, for he nodded his head vigorously several times. Then he turned to Ted.

"Young man," he said, in a sneering tone, "I have decided to get along without your services. You are evidently a very conceited fellow, and it is doubtful if you could find the girl, should you try. We will, therefore, ask you and your friends to pardon our interruption. You are at liberty to ride on."

"Good," replied Ted, and waved his hands to his friends to follow him.

But at that minute the third stranger, the brown-haired youth, suddenly uttered a sentence which caused the young rough rider to again rein in his horse.

"Do not go, young man. If Mr. Doland thus dismisses your services I have a request to make of you. I am interested in this young lady's disappearance, and if you will help me find her you will earn my heartfelt gratitude. I will answer the question which Mr. Doland refused to answer."

Ted was not looking at the young man who spoke. He was looking at Doland and at the dark young man.

The face of the girl's father turned purple with anger when he heard the words uttered by the curly-haired lad. The face of the dark man was furrowed with angry lines of passion. They were both angry and apparently greatly displeased.

"Very well, I am at your service," was Ted's short answer.

The young man started to approach the young rough rider.

"Stop where you are, Frank Cooper!" almost shrieked the enraged Doland.

With a calm, fearless countenance the lad addressed as Frank Cooper turned his eyes upon the angry broker and replied:

"I refuse to stop! Your daughter may be somewhere in great danger. I know why she left relatives and friends and ran into the wilds of Mexico. I will tell this young man the whole story. He will help me to find my affianced wife!"

"You lie!" This came from the dark young man; and, as he spoke, he drew from his pocket a small, ivory-handled revolver and leveled it directly toward Cooper.

With his finger already pressed against the trigger, he hissed:

"You shall die before you have time to tell any family secret!"

It was plainly his intention to shoot Cooper.

But, before he could pull the trigger, there was the sharp report of another revolver.

The discharged weapon was in the hands of Ted Strong.

The young rough rider's bullet had; perhaps, saved the life of young Cooper, for it had entered the wrist of the man who had been about to fire.

The ivory-handled toy went clattering to the ground.

Then Ted suddenly made a decisive plan. It was plain that Cooper would now wish to sever whatever connection he had formely had with the other two men.

With a revolver in each hand, Ted faced the broker and his dark-complexioned companion.

"I have spent all the time I can spare with you two gentlemen," said Ted, "and now I will give you just one minute to get started on your way!"

Doland and his young companion lost no time in acting upon the strong hint of the young rough rider to make themselves scarce.

When the two had disappeared beyond a bend in the trail, Ted turned to Cooper and said:

"Now, sir, we will be glad to listen to your story. The girl, whom you proclaimed to be your affianced wife, is, as we know, in serious trouble, and you must make your story as short as possible."

"And you will help me in finding and assisting her?" asked Cooper, eagerly.

"I think so," answered Ted.

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT COOPER HAD TO TELL.

"As we have lost considerable time and are in a great hurry," said the young rough rider to Cooper, "perhaps you had better tell us your story as we ride along. We can thus gain time."

So, as Ted's party rode along into Dragon Pass, Frank Cooper told the young rough rider why the girl had so

suddenly run away from the party, consisting of her parents and other Americans, who were touring Mexico.

Cooper first told Ted that the name of the beautiful Philadelphia girl was Katherine Doland, but usually called Kate by her intimate friends.

Cooper's story, in short, was about as follows:

Cooper had first met the girl at college. He was poor and was working his way through the university. The girl was taking a special course in music.

They had met and had fallen in love. Secretly they had become engaged. The girl finished her course a year before Cooper was through, but they had kept up a close correspondence.

It was their plan to be married when he had finished school and had found a situation.

Just before he had graduated, however, the girl's father had discovered some of the letters Cooper had written to his daughter.

Doland was indignant. There was a storm. Doland informed Kate that he would never consent to her marrying the poor man.

However, the girl stood up for her own rights. She informed her father that she would either marry the man of her choice or remain single.

Thus matters stood for several months, until Cooper had graduated and had gone to Philadelphia to look for a situation.

Upon the very day of his arrival in Philadelphia he had received news of the sudden death of a bachelor uncle, who had left him a comfortable fortune.

With the knowledge of this good fortune, which he hoped to be a point in his favor, Cooper had hastened to tell his affianced wife of the news, and then had gone to Doland's office to ask the broker for his consent to the marriage.

The broker was busy, but one of his clerks conducted Cooper to the broker's private office, to wait until the business man was at liberty to talk with him.

It was late in the day.

The private office was an interior room, lighted only by a skylight, and, it being a cloudy day, it was quite dark in there.

Cooper had made a long trip by train and was tired.

Seated in one corner of the office, half hidden behind a heavy folding desk, he laid his head back against the soft, easy back of his chair and fell asleep.

He was suddenly awakened shortly afterward by hearing a voice in the room. He would have started up quickly and made his presence known had not the sentence which he heard fairly dazed him.

These were the words, and they were spoken by Doland himself:

"I will accede to your demand. I promise that within three months Kate shall become your wife."

Then came an answer.

"But your daughter does not love me. Are you certain you can make her bend to your will?"

"I must make her marry you. What I set about to do in real earnest I am certain to accomplish," Doland had replied.

"Then I will not press my claim against you. I could certainly ruin you financially by a stroke of the pen. I want to marry your daughter. She shall be the price for which I relinquish these papers."

"You have my word for it that she shall marry you."

A moment later the men had left the office and Cooper found himself alone.

With a confused mind, his thoughts all in a chaos, Cooper made his way unobserved to the street. Mechanically he walked, he knew not where, until he found himself mounting the steps of the Doland residence in one of the fashionable districts of the city, miles from the broker's office.

Before he realized what he was doing he found himself ringing the bell.

He was admitted to the house and asked to see Miss Kate. He was shown into the drawing room by the servant, and ten minutes later found himself face to face with the girl's father instead of the girl.

A stormy scene followed.

He told the broker of the fortune which had been left him, and asked for the daughter's hand. He was refused.

Then, indignantly, he accused the father of plotting to sell the daughter's happiness.

A servant was called, and Frank was forcibly ejected from the house.

For several days he made attempts to see Kate, but unsuccessfully. The girl was kept in the house, and the house was well guarded against his intrusion.

Then, by bribing a servant, Frank finally succeeded in getting a short note to the girl. An answer was received, and, in her answer, the girl told Frank that her father had commanded her to marry a certain man, slightly known to her, whose name was Casper Gaylord.

Casper Gaylord, while quite young, was well known as a plunger in stocks. It was known that he had been lucky in speculations, many of which were of a shady character, and that he had amassed a large fortune.

But the man's reputation was none of the best. While feared for the power he held in the financial world, he was cordially hated by the men who were forced to deal with him in the markets.

In her letter Kate declared that she would never accede to her father's demands, and bade Frank to cheer up and wait for her.

While the letter to a great degree encouraged the young man, he could not but continue to fear that the father would in some way compel his daughter to bend to his

will. His promise to Casper Gaylord, made in his office that day and heard by Frank, had been a definite promise.

Besides, it appeared that should he not carry out that agreement with Gaylord, the latter had the power to crush Doland financially.

It was certain that Doland would leave no stone unturned to compel Kate to become Gaylord's wife.

The matter finally came to a head when Cooper received a note at his hotel one day. It was from Kate, and was delivered by the servant who had first been bribed by Frank.

The note contained the information that Kate, with her father and mother and a party of family friends, were about to start on a trip—to include a tour of old Mexico. Kate stated that she suspected that the trip had been planned to throw her into the company of Gaylord, as she was certain the man had been invited to join the party. She begged her lover to proceed at once to Mexico and meet her in a certain town on their route. This town was Soccoro.

Cooper answered the note, saying he would do as the girl requested.

Cooper waited in town only long enough to learn the date of the departure of the Doland family and the rest of the party. Then he went immediately to Mexico.

He did not, however, go directly to Soccoro, but, getting track of the tourists, he dogged their steps from one town to another, but found no opportunity to get a word with the girl.

He feared that the route of the tourists might be changed from the original plans, and that the small mountain town of Soccoro, quite off from the regular line of travel, might be dropped.

But an accident happened to Cooper. While in the town of Waso, he was one night attacked by footpads and rendered unconscious. He was not robbed, as had evidently been the intention of the men who had attacked him, but he was rendered unconscious and remained in that condition for several hours. Happily he had been wise enough not to carry much of his wealth about his person.

When he finally came to his senses he found that the Doland party had left the town and started for Puerto.

He was delayed in getting away, and arrived in Puerto late the following day. Arriving in the latter town, he came face to face with Mrs. Doland in the street. The mother of his sweetheart rushed to him with tears falling down her cheeks.

"Kate has disappeared!" was her exclamation. "She has run away, and you must help us find her."

As she spoke the mother had thrust a crumpled piece of paper into the young man's hand. He opened it and found it to be a hastily scribbled note from Kate to her mother. It was short and to the point.

It read as follows:

"MOTHER: Father insists that I must marry Casper Gaylord. I cannot do it, for I love another—Frank Cooper. You must forgive me, but I am about to go to the only man I love. He is waiting for me. I will write to you later, when we are married. KATE."

"Where is my daughter?" asked the anxious mother.

Instantly Frank suspected that the girl had taken the stage for Soccoro, where she had every reason to believe her lover was waiting for her.

"I have not seen her," said Frank, in answer to the mother's question, "but I have a suspicion as to where she is, and will help find her."

At that moment Doland and Gaylord appeared.

What might have been their greeting to Frank is not known had not the mother been the first to speak.

"Oh, Jeremiah," she exclaimed, "I have found Mr. Cooper, and he says he can find Kate."

"Do you know the whereabouts of my daughter, young man?" asked the broker.

"Yes," replied Frank, with a sudden resolve. "She has taken the evening stage for Soccoro."

Hastily Doland started for a stable to rent two horses to pursue his daughter, and Frank, not to be left behind, kept close to his heels.

When Doland and Gaylord were mounted and ready to start, Frank also had a horse and was ready to accompany them.

All that night the three traveled along the stage route, and until nearly noon the following day, when they met the young rough rider and his party.

While not openly resenting Frank's company, the young man had been left out of all their conversations by Doland and Gaylord.

CHAPTER V.

KATE'S EXPERIENCES.

We will, for the present, leave Ted Strong and his party as they are riding along toward the scene of the stage hold up, and, while Ted is telling Frank Cooper about Kate's being captured by some of the members of that gang of bandits known as the Coahuila Demons, we will dwell for a few moments upon the experiences of Kate Doland.

After her arrival, with her parents, in Puerto, Kate learned that her father had made up his mind to change the route to be taken by the touring party. He had decided not to journey to Soccoro. Why this change had been decided upon Kate did not learn.

But she realized that if she would meet her lover, Frank Cooper, at Soccoro, as she had promised to do, she must run away from the tourists.

The trip thus far had been far from enjoyable.

The man, whom her father had insisted she should marry, had continually forced his attentions upon her.

While he had not openly asked her to marry him, he had evidently assumed that she was to become his wife.

He had assumed a sort of interest in her which was altogether out of place to her mind, and very disgusting to her.

He had made no pretensions of loving her, but she knew that he regarded her as his lawful prey.

The more she saw of the man the more she loathed him.

Her father had not taken her into his confidence, had given her no reason for his wish that she should marry a man whom she cordially disliked in preference to the only man she felt she could love.

Kate was not long in deciding to run away from the party for the purpose of joining her lover.

She laid her plans carefully, ascertained when the stage would leave, wrote the note to her mother at the last moment, packed a few of her most needful possessions and slipped away.

But, while her departure was not known to her parents or other members of the touring party, there was one individual who had seen and noted every move she made. He had been near when she paid her fare, and had made a note of her objective point.

This man was no other than a Mexican known as Miguel, who had been hired at one time by Hobart and Morton as a guide, and who had proved to be a traitor. He was a member of the Coahuila Demons.

It is not known what business took Miguel to Puerto, but he was there when the Doland party arrived. He had learned that Doland was the father of the beautiful girl, and that Doland was reputed to be fabulously wealthy.

A scheme for kidnaping the girl and holding her for ransom had entered the fertile mind of the bandit, but he had found no opportunity for carrying out the scheme until he had seen the girl enter the stage for the purpose of making the night journey to Soccoro.

Then Miguel saw a way of carrying out his nefarious scheme.

Miguel knew well the route which must be taken by the stage.

With a swift horse he started out over the trail an hour ahead of the stage. He knew where to find some of his bandit companions, and he quickly told them of his plot.

We have seen how they assisted him to hold up the stage and kidnap the girl.

When she first found herself in the hands of the bandits, Kate suspected that her father or Gaylord had learned of her sudden departure from Puerto and had hired these men to head her off, but she soon learned different.

After she had been compelled to mount the extra horse, she was taken up the trail through the pass for a short distance and then off to the south, on a branching trail through the mountains.

When well on the way, Miguel rode up close to the animal upon which the girl was riding, and said: "Señorita, do not be alarmed for your personal safety. We have no intention of harming you in the least in any respect. We know that your father is wealthy and that he will pay a handsome ransom for your release. He will be notified of how to secure your liberty as quickly as possible and there is little doubt but that you will soon be free to go back to him."

As Miguel spoke the girl's eyes dilated with fear.

She did not fear that she would be killed. She had so far entertained no thought of harm of a physical nature coming to her. But she was alarmed when she learned that it was the object of the bandits to compel her father to pay a ransom for her release.

She had no doubt that a ransom would be paid as quickly as it was demanded of her father.

But more than the fate which might befall her at the hands of the bandits, she feared to be turned over to her father.

Such a return to her father would only mean more and stronger persecutions on the account of Gaylord, and would also mean that she would be so closely watched that it would be impossible for her to again run away.

Kate turned Miguel's words over and over in her mind.

She was wondering how much the bandits would require in the shape of a ransom.

Would the sum which they would demand be more than could be paid by her lover, Frank Cooper?

She knew that Frank had been left a competence recently by an old uncle, but she had no idea how large nor how small that competence might be.

However, she determined, if possible, to send the bandits in search of Frank for the ransom, instead of her father.

To Miguel she finally said:

"Sir, you are right when you say that my father is rich, but you have drawn wrong conclusions in other regards."

"How so, señorita?" asked Miguel.

"My father would not be apt to pay any sum, large or small, for my liberty. He has disowned me as his daughter. I have displeased him by refusing to marry a man whom he picked out as a husband for me."

At this Miguel raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders suggestively. Kate suspected that her statement was doubted.

The girl, under the circumstances, had felt no compunction in telling the lie that had passed her lips. She had her happiness for life at stake. Her conscience told her that in the present instance she did right in trying to mislead the bandit.

Seeing signs of doubt in Miguel's face and actions, she hastened to add to what she had said.

"But there is one man who, if you can find him, will be certain to pay you for releasing me. He has some wealth, but not much. He is my lover, the man whom I have promised to marry."

"And who may he be?" asked Miguel.

"His name is Frank Cooper, and I have every reason to believe that he may now be found in Soccoro, waiting for me to join him," was Kate's answer.

Miguel did not answer Kate at once, but finally he said: "We will investigate this matter. We will look up the young man and see what he has to offer. Then if your father refuses to act, we may make terms with your lover."

Thus speaking, Miguel spurred his horse, and once more took the lead of the party.

For an hour or more the trail led through narrow mountain passes, and then suddenly they came to quite a wide valley.

Before riding down into the valley, the bandits stopped for a few moments and Kate's eyes were blinded by a heavy, cotton handkerchief.

After that, of course, the girl lost all track of directions and landmarks.

She knew that the traveling for the next half hour or so was quite smooth; then there came fifteen or twenty minutes of rough climbing.

When the bandage was finally taken from her eyes she found herself, still mounted, in a large cave, which seemed to have several branching passages.

She was apparently in the stronghold of the bandits.

The cave was well lighted with lanterns, but not one ray of sunlight entered the place. The cave seemed to be in the very heart of some big mountain.

At first Kate could hardly make out the objects in the cave, but, when her eyes became accustomed to the new light, she discovered a girl of about her own age in another part of the cave.

The girl was dressed in the rich, bright colors of the Mexican señoritas of gentle birth. Kate could not make out whether the girl was bound or not.

The Mexican girl was no other than Anita.

CHAPTER VI.

A PLOT AGAINST COOPER.

Within an hour after Ted's party had been joined by Frank Cooper, they came to the spot where the stage had been held up and Kate Doland had been kidnaped by members of the Coahuila Demons.

It was some time after noon, and, at Ted's suggestion, his men ate a hasty, cold dinner before beginning operations.

Then the tiresome work of finding the trail taken by the bandits was commenced.

If Ted Strong was an expert with the revolver and rifle, a champion lasso thrower and horse breaker, and a man in a class by himself in mining and cattle raising, he was also an adept in another accomplishment, greatly esteemed by the true sons of the West.

His skill in picking and following a trail was only equaled by the red men, the Indians.

But, in the present instance, Ted found a problem worthy of his best skill.

The trail through Dragon Pass was much used. Many horsemen, as well as wagons and other vehicles, passed along that trail almost daily.

The nature of the soil was not conducive to retaining imprints of hoofs. Ted had a hard job before him.

Realizing this, Ted began his work systematically. He did not rush matters nor jump quickly at conclusions.

As a result, he made better headway, perhaps than could have been made otherwise. At least, he knew that every conclusion arrived at was correct. There was no going back to begin his work over again.

It was slow work, and it was sundown before Ted had finally learned that the bandits, who had held up the stage, had left the pass by the way of the branching trail to the south.

Ted and his followers had traced the bandits thus far, slowly and surely.

After entering this branching trail, Ted knew that his work would be easier from then on, but, it now being nearly dark, he realized that it would probably be necessary to wait until morning before proceeding much further.

Although impatient to be after the bandits, Ted told his companions to prepare for camping all night on the trail.

In their haste in leaving Soccoro, Ted's men had brought few things in the shape of provisions with them. Each man had taken but a few slices of dried meat and a few hard-tacks. They had had a cold dinner.

But there was plenty of game in the mountains, and, before it became too dark, Ted instructed Bud Morgan and Max Morton to go off in one direction to procure some fresh game, while himself and Ralph Hobart went in another direction.

Thus they started, with the intention of shooting some game birds or animals as quickly as possible and returning immediately to camp.

During their absence the other members of the party were to water and picket the horses and gather wood to start a fire.

Ted and Ralph rode down the mountain pass for a mile or so, and then turned up into a small ravine. They had probably traveled two miles from camp before they came across any game. They then succeeded in scaring up a small covey of California quail.

To Hobart's delight he succeeded in bringing down two of these birds, while Ted was bagging seven of them.

There was plenty of meat on the nine birds to satisfy the appetites of the entire party, and the two young men at once turned their horses' heads toward camp.

They had arrived within a quarter of a mile of the branching trail in which their friends were camping, when Hobart's saddle girth became loose, and it was necessary to stop for a few moments to fasten it.

At this point a long ridge of rocks ran down the center of the pass, dividing the trail. A path ran along each side of the ridge.

To pass this ridge, Ted and his friend had happened to turn into the path to the right. As they were standing still, while Hobart was tying up the girth, they suddenly heard the sounds of horses' hoofs on the opposite side of the ridge.

From the sounds the young rough rider knew that there were three horsemen riding up the path to the left. The three horsemen came to a sudden halt very nearly opposite the place where Ted and his friend had stopped.

Then Ted could hear voices. The very first sentence uttered he recognized the voice of Jeremiah Doland, the broker, the father of the kidnaped girl!

The words were these:

"While I am willing to pay a ransom for my daughter's release, I claim that the price you ask is too high."

"Not too high, señor, when you consider the worth of the señorita," came an answer back in a voice which Hobart thought he had heard before somewhere recently.

"Besides," continued the same voice, "the girl has a lover who, I have good reason to believe, is willing to pay that price, and, perhaps, more, for her release."

By this time Ted and Ralph had each dismounted, and had noiselessly climbed the ridge. It was now dark, but the stars were bright, and they could see quite plainly the three men in the path below them.

They recognized them at once as Doland, Gaylord and the Mexican known as Miguel.

It was Miguel who had last spoken, and his statement regarding the girl's lover had apparently been a poser for Doland.

"The devil!"

That was the exclamation from the broker.

Miguel inhaled a deep puff from his cigarette, blew the smoke out through his nostrils and then shrugged his shoulders suggestively.

He was evidently well pleased with the point he had made.

"Have you been talking with my daughter's lover?" asked Doland.

"No, señor. My talk has so far been with you and the señorita. She says the young man has the money and will spend it. She begged me to go to him—not you. I half promised to see her lover first, but you were the first, because I chanced by accident to run across you."

"You are a brave man, sir, to openly and alone hail me as I am riding along, admit that you kidnaped my daughter and demand a reward for her safe return to me. You are now but one against two. Still you seem quite unconcerned. What is the matter with my companion and myself seizing you and holding you as a guarantee that my daughter will return to us unharmed and still not ransomed?" asked Doland.

A wicked smile covered the face of Miguel as he looked up insolently into the face of the rich man.

"Ah, señor, I have no fear of you nor of your companion. You dare not harm me."

"I dare not? And why?" demanded Doland.

"Because if you did you would never see your daughter's face again!" was the startling answer.

Even in the starlight Ted and Ralph could see the faces of both Doland and Gaylord turn pale with apprehension.

"Do you mean that?" asked Gaylord, in trembling tones.

"Certainly," answered Miguel, nonchalantly.

Gaylord leaned over in his saddle and nervously clutched the arm of his would-be father-in-law.

"For Heaven's sake, man," he said, "give this fellow the money he demands, and get hold of your daughter as quickly as possible."

Things certainly seemed to be coming Miguel's direction.

"The young señor's advice is good," announced the Mexican.

"If I agree to pay this sum, which you demand, what security have I for the release of my daughter?" asked Doland. The broker was a shrewd man, and his business instinct did not now desert him.

"I will take you immediately, to-night, to where she is held a prisoner. You will pay the money and she will be set free. You have, however, only my word for it that none of you three will be molested while leaving the mountains." This was Miguel's answer.

And with that answer Doland had to be content. Miguel would consent to no other terms. He would not agree to bring the girl to her father at any settlement. He knew he had everything in his own hands, and he would take no personal risks of being captured himself or any of his companions in crime.

For a long time Doland labored with the Mexican, trying to come to some other agreement, but in the end he agreed to the terms offered by the Mexican.

They were about to move on when, suddenly, Doland seemed to think of something of importance.

"Wait a moment," he exclaimed.

Miguel looked up inquiringly.

"I suppose you have no objections to making all the money you can out of this deal?" asked Doland.

"The more money the merrier I can feel," answered Miguel, wonderingly.

"You know the name of this lover of my daughter, and where he can probably be found?"

The Mexican nodded in assent.

"I hate him. He has stolen my daughter's affections. I wish to marry her to a better man than he. I have no objections to your working him for all the money you can."

"Speak more clearly, señor," said Miguel.

"I will. I agree to pay you the ransom you ask. As soon as you have turned the girl over to me, go to this man, Cooper, and demand a ransom from him. Get all the money you can from him and then give him the laugh."

Miguel's teeth glistened in a smile.

"Ah! I see, señor. You are cute. You mean to give Señor Cooper what an *Americano* would call the horse laugh? Ah! yes. Your suggestion is one worthy of our own bandit queen—our Anita—and it shall be acted upon. Many thanks, señor. Many thanks. For that idea I will see that yourself, your friend and your daughter are escorted out of the mountains safely. But now let us start for the place where your daughter is being held. She will certainly rejoice in your coming. She is a pretty girl, señor, and it is wrong to keep her too long in suspense. You are sure you have the money with you to pay the ransom?"

"Yes. Is the distance far?"

"Not over two hours' ride, and the moon will soon be up," was Miguel's answer.

As the three riders started off, Ted and Ralph quickly climbed from the rocks and regained their saddles.

"Ralph," exclaimed Ted, suddenly, "there is no time to lose, and I am going to follow those three men tonight!"

"Alone?" asked Hobart, in surprise.

"Yes, there is no other way. You must return at once to the camp, notify the boys as to where I have gone, and bid them follow me as quickly as possible."

"But how will they know which way you have gone?" asked Hobart.

Ted was silent for a moment; then he answered:

"I have with me four blue cotton handkerchiefs. As I ride along I will tear small pieces from them and drop them along the trail every rod or so. We will play the old game of hare and hounds. Do you catch the idea?"

Ted transferred from his own saddle to Hobart's the string of quail which had been shot by him, then, as they came back into the open trail and the figures of the three riders could be seen some distance ahead, the two young men grasped hands silently and parted company.

A few moments later Ted, the brave, young rough rider, was following Miguel and the two American villains into the heart of the enemies' country.

Ted little knew of the dangers ahead of him. He knew that he was taking desperate chances—that he was virtually taking his life in his hands in making this venture—but he could not foresee the terrible ordeal through which he was to pass before again seeing his friends face to face.

CHAPTER VII.

THE JEALOUSY OF A WOMAN.

"I believe, Miguel, that you are lying!"

The scene was in the cave to which Kate Doland had been taken by the bandits under the leadership of Miguel, after they had kidnaped her.

The time was early that morning and shortly after Kate's arrival at the cave.

The words were Anita's, and they had been in answer to a statement made by Miguel.

Kate was still in the cave, but had been removed to another chamber.

After Kate had been led through one of the branching passages to this other chamber, Anita had asked:

"Who is that girl, and why have you brought her here?"

What it was that put this answer into Miguel's mind cannot be determined, but his reply was:

"That girl, Anita, is the sweetheart of Ted Strong, the young rough rider, the young man with whom you promised to return to Texas."

There was a vengeful look in Miguel's eyes as he made the false statement, but, knowing that his eyes might betray him, he had artfully turned his face away from the young bandit queen.

But Anita was not to be fooled readily. She had uttered the exclamation which opens this chapter. And Miguel had quickly replied:

"Anita, as I live, I have spoken the truth. I found the girl in Puerto with her parents. Her father is immensely wealthy. She took the evening stage to go to her lover at Soccoro. I got a part of the gang together and held up the stage and captured the girl. My purpose is to hold her for ransom."

"The girl shall not be held for ransom!" exclaimed Anita.

"Then you would allow her to go at once?" asked Miguel. There was just the suspicion of a sneer in his question.

"No!" almost screamed Anita, stamping her foot in rage. "She must not be allowed to leave this place alive. If she is the sweetheart of Ted Strong she must die! I, myself, will put her to death!"

"You are jealous," was Miguel's taunting remark.

"That is little of your business. Whether or not I am jealous, that doll-faced girl must die!" exclaimed the Mexican girl.

Then there came a dangerous glitter in the eyes of Miguel. He approached Anita with a raised, clinched fist, as if to strike, but there was an expression in her face that caused him to change his mind.

"Anita, you forget your position here. You have been so used to dictating that it is probably hard for you to remember that you are little better than a prisoner yourself. It is not for you now to determine what policies shall be carried out by the Coahuila Demons, but for me, the newly elected chief of this band."

Anita's anger was now clearly at a boiling point.

"You are not the chief!" she screamed. "It is for me but to say the word to regain my old place. You were merely elected to take my place should I continue to refuse to act as the queen of this gang, and you know it. It was my desire, a few hours ago, to forsake this life, to return to Texas, to lead a new life. Ted Strong befriended me and showed me a way to accomplish my desires. With perfect honesty I told the members of the gang that I was about to leave them. You professed to love me, and begged me not to go, but I insisted. Beyond pleadings from many of the band to stay with them, there was no opposition to my going. No one tried forcibly to stop me when I went to join the rough riders at Soccoro. But, at the last moment, you begged the privilege of coming to the hotel, early in the morning, before my final departure, and bidding me a last farewell. Because I believed I was wounding your feelings by leaving you, I consented. I remained awake to listen for your signal, and when it came, I responded. You were not alone, as I had expected. Other members of the band, your own particular friends, were with you. Instead of bidding me farewell, you and your friends forcibly seized me, bound me and brought me back to the cave. Not only that, but, before my eyes, your assistants struck down Ted Strong, the only man I ever loved or ever will love!"

Anita's eyes were flashing sparks of fire as she talked. Her cheeks were aflame with passion. She had been talking fast and furiously, and now she paused for a moment to catch her breath. Miguel seemed to be somewhat cowed by the force of Anita's passion. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but Anita gave him little chance. She began again as vehemently as ever.

"You dare to pose as the leader of the Coahuila Demons? You know my power here better than that. Every member of this band, almost, would hail with joy one word from me voicing a determination to remain here as their queen, their leader. And thus shall it be. Do you hear? Within an hour my bonds shall be cut, and I, not you, shall dictate what shall be done with this girl whom you have brought here to taunt me with! And I shall also decide what punishhment shall be dealt out to you, you miserable coward, for your misdemeanor!

"I did not choose to go to Texas for the purpose of leading a new life. Bah! You know that. I consented to go for the reason that I loved the young rough rider. He loves me not. I am certain now that he could never have been made to love me. I consented to his plan with the vague hope in my breast that sometime, when I appeared to be changed, that I could make him learn to love me. And, failing to inspire love in his heart for me, I determined to resort to some other scheme to make him marry me. Now my plans have been torn to pieces. You have hindered me. You shall be punished for this work. Do you hear? Ah! but my revenge upon you will be sweet, and it shall be complete! But, first, I must attend to putting to death this girl—this doll-faced cherub, whom Ted Strong has dared to love, whose lips have probably often felt his kisses.

"Did I say I love Ted Strong? I lied. I did love him, but now—oh, how I hate him! I wish he were now in my power as he has been in my power once, yes, twice, before. I would kill him, too! Yes, I would delight in killing him! He must die at any cost! He——

"Miguel!"

Anita had suddenly broken from her tangled run of passionate sentences and had uttered the one word with a vehemence which caused the man to start and shake like like a leaf in a strong wind.

But he managed to stammer: "W-what is it y-you w-want?"

"I owe you a severe punishment for this day's work. I will give you one chance to redeem yourself."

"What is the chance, my queen?" asked the man.

"Release my bonds and then go in search of the young rough rider. Take what men you need, but be certain that you capture him. Bring him here that I may put him to death. If you are successful in this, I will forget your recent indiscretions."

"There is just one little condition, señorita, I would ask," returned Miguel.

"And that is?"

"We need money. Our treasury is getting low. I had figured on replenishing it by obtaining a ransom from this girl's father. If you kill her that cannot be. If you will commission me to capture her father and bring him here until he, himself, has been ransomed, I will consent to your propositions."

"Your condition is a good one. It is always well to look to money matters. I accept."

Silently Miguel stepped toward Anita, and, with his knife, severed her bonds.

Anita was once more free, and once more the girl queen of the Coahuila Demons. She had conceived a fiendish plan, which, if carried out, would be a terrible revenge upon Ted Strong and the girl, Kate, whom Anita believed to be the young rough rider's sweetheart.

Her first impulse had been to kill Kate immediately. Now she had another plan.

CHAPTER VIII.

TED IS TRAPPED.

After releasing Anita, Miguel started at once to carry out her orders.

He went alone, and he took a short cut direct for Soccoro.

Not all of the members of Coahuila Demons' gang were at the cave, and Miguel expected to pick up five or six assistants on his way.

According to Anita's directions, his first work was to capture Ted Strong.

That was Miguel's plan when he started, but a chance meeting with the rich broker and Gaylord on the trail caused the bandit to alter his intentions.

Here, he reflected, was an opportunity to lead Doland and the other young man to the cave, which might not come his way so readily again.

He hailed the broker, and we have seen what methods he used to coax Doland and Gaylord to go with him.

Of course Miguel had no intentions of keeping any of the promises made to Doland. The Mexican intended, when he reached the cave, to make both Doland and Gaylord prisoners, make the men disgorge what money they had on their persons and then hold them for big ransoms besides.

Little did Miguel dream just then that the young rough rider was within earshot at the time he was talking with Doland.

He had no idea, as he guided the two Easterners away toward the mountain cave, that Ted Strong followed them at a discreet distance.

It would be uninteresting to note the steps taken by the young rough rider in following the three men ahead of him, how he managed to keep them almost constantly in sight, yet, by various tactics, to remain out of their vision.

The journey had hardly been started when the full, mellow, southern moon came up. It was now almost as light as day.

As he rode along, closely following the Mexican, Doland and Gaylord, Ted worked constantly with his fingers, tearing off and throwing to the ground pieces from his cotton handkerchiefs. These pieces were small, but were dropped at every few paces.

Ted was leaving behind a plain trail for his friends to follow.

It was not later than ten o'clock when Ted, from the actions of the men ahead, knew that the journey's end was near at hand.

He was now following the three men down the valley, before mentioned, and was not far behind them when he saw them make a sharp turn to the right out of the valley and into a deep and narrow canyon.

Ted approached the entrance to the canyon cautiously. When within a rod or so of it, he dismounted and went ahead on foot. He knew that he was now in imminent danger. He was alone, while he knew that his enemies numbered a great many—how many he had no idea.

But Ted was resolved to follow the Mexican bandit clear to the stronghold of the gang.

Ted noiselessly approached the narrow entrance to the canyon.

But when he reached it, he found that the three men, whom he had been following, had passed beyond hearing and sight into the canyon.

Ted returned for his horse, remounted, and rode fearlessly into the gloom of the unknown canyon.

Here it was quite dark. The canyon was so deep and so narrow that the rays of the moon afforded little light.

Ted knew not at what moment he might run up against some of his enemies. He was taking desperate chances.

But still he pressed forward, relying considerably upon the instinct of his intelligent horse to follow the trail.

Perhaps Ted had thus ridden a mile, when his horse suddenly stopped dead still in the trail.

Ted did not urge the animal forward. He knew the horse would not have stopped had there not been some reason for it—something of an unusual nature in its path.

Quickly the young rough rider dismounted and investigated the trail ahead.

He found that, directly in front of the horse, was a swinging, wooden bridge of some kind, which stretched over a deep chasm. The chasm reached from one side of the canyon to the other and was several rods in width.

Ted walked across the bridge to test its strength. It seemed movable, but strong.

He remounted and urged the horse ahead. The animal readily obeyed Ted's signal and was quickly across the bridge. Ted was about to ride on up the canyon when a sudden, sliding, creaking sound behind him attracted his attention.

The noise lasted for several seconds.

Ted quickly dismounted and started back toward the bridge. A sudden suspicion entered his mind.

His suspicion was well founded, for, on investigation, Ted found that the swinging bridge, over which he had just crossed, had disappeared.

It had been removed by some mechanical means, probably by some of the bandits.

On making the discovery, Ted quickly drew his revolvers and held them ready for instant use, while, with strained eyes trying to pierce the darkness of the canyon, he gazed in all directions, hoping to catch sight of his enemies.

But there was no sign of any human presence in the canyon. Not a single sound broke the stillness of the night.

For several minutes Ted Strong stood thus on the alert, half expecting that the stillness of the night air would be broken at any minute by a sharp report and the singing of a rifle ball aimed in his direction.

But time passed and nothing happened.

Then Ted came to the conclusion that the mechanism which controlled the bridge had been worked from some distant part of the canyon or mountain, and that the bridge had just happened to have been rolled away immediately after he had crossed it.

This thought in a measure calmed Ted's fears.

He could not now retreat had he wished, but Ted had no thought of retreating. He soon continued his travel up the trail in the direction taken by Miguel and his two dupes.

Not more than ten minutes after crossing the bridge the young rough rider came to a sudden turn in the trail, and, as he passed the bend, he saw rays of light on one side of the canyon ahead.

The whole side of the canyon was lighted up, and from the tops of a low pile of big rocks on the other side of the canyon arose a cloud of smoke.

Beyond the pile of rocks there was evidently a big camp fire.

Ted dismounted and approached the rocks on foot, carefully and noiselessly. He had not quite reached a position in the deep shadows when he heard sounds of voices. Miguel was talking in his native language to several men near the fire.

Then, a second later, Doland's voice was heard.

Ted reached a position where he could distinguish the words of the answer to Doland's remarks. They were spoken in plain English by Miguel.

"You will see your daughter soon, señor. Just step this way into the cave."

From chinks through the rocks Ted could now see Miguel, Doland, Gaylord and four other men, members of the bandit gang, standing near a big fire and before the entrance to a cavity in the face of the mountain.

As Miguel made the remark to Doland, he had started into the cave, and the two Americans followed him.

Then, at that moment, Ted was surprised to see the four bandits suddenly spring forward, two toward each of the Americans.

Doland and Gaylord were quickly subdued and bound.

"What does this mean?" asked Doland, indignantly.

But the only answer that was given him by the person he had addressed, Miguel, was a wicked smile of triumph.

"I demand that you release me instantly!" exclaimed the infuriated broker.

"That must be later, at the order of our queen," answered Miguel.

Ted had been interestedly watching the developments of the affair on the opposite side of the pile of rocks. He had seen every detail. He had not anticipated this downfall for the Americans. He was absorbed in figuring out Miguel's object in thus binding the two men.

While still engaged in looking through the chinks of the rocks, Ted suddenly heard the rattle of loose gravel behind him.

It was such a sound as might have been made by stepping carelessly upon a loose stone.

Instantly Ted started to turn around, his hand traveling toward the hilt of his revolver.

But too late!

A heavy blow from a clubbed rifle felled Ted to the earth, and, before he could regain his feet or get hold of his revolver, three men had jumped upon him and held him pinned to the ground!

He was in the power of several of the Coahuila Demons!

The noise of the struggle had attracted Miguel from the opposite side of the pile of rocks.

In a moment he was looking down upon the young rough rider with a surprised look upon his face. But there was also a gleam of delight in his eyes.

"Ah, it is Ted Strong! This is certainly rich, but how did he come to be here? Adolph, did you not pull in the bridge when I gave the signal?"

"Yes, señor," answered one of the men who had helped capture Doland and Gaylord.

"Then this young rough rider must have followed me closely into the canyon and he must have crossed the bridge just before it was taken in," exclaimed Miguel.

For a moment he stood and gloated over the helpless condition of the young rough rider.

Then a ringing, wicked, cruel laugh escaped his lips.

"This will be welcome news for Anita," he exclaimed. "She will credit me with a good night's work."

Ted could not restrain from asking one question:

"Anita, then, is still acting as queen of the Coahuila Demons?"

The answer came quickly:

"Certainly, she is our queen. She has always been our queen. Did you imagine for a minute that she intended to go with you to Texas? She has given orders for us to capture you. She will put you to death—not you only, but also the girl, Kate. These other two men may eventually be allowed their liberty, providing they can furnish the required amount of money."

CHAPTER IX.

ANITA'S PROPOSITION.

Some minutes after his capture Ted found himself in an interior chamber of the cave, which was evidently the great stronghold of the bandits.

He was bound hand and foot, and was lying upon the hard, cold, stone floor of the cave. And he was all alone.

He had plenty of time for thought, and his mind was busy.

But, even now, when Ted found himself in this perilous position, with little hope of getting out alive, his thoughts turned more to the peril of the young woman than to himself.

Had Miguel been lying when he had stated that both the girl and himself were to be put to death, by orders of the bandit queen?

How could he save the girl?

The question was a poser. How, indeed, could he hope to be of assistance to Kate Doland, while he was powerless to help even himself?

But Ted had been in many tight places. Many times he had faced death. His cool courage, his tenacious clinging to what had seemed forlorn hope, his quick actions when the slightest of chances appeared—these had helped him to escape death almost miraculously on several different occasions.

And Ted also relied considerably upon what he called his good luck. Perhaps Ted was modest in calling it his good luck. More times it was ingenuity on his part, rather than luck, that had saved his life.

But if Miguel had told the truth when he stated that the bandit queen was determined that Kate Doland should die, what reason had the bandit queen for wishing the girl's death?

This question Ted could find no answer for.

Of course he had no knowledge of the lying statement made by Miguel to Anita, that Kate was Ted's sweetheart.

He did not know that it was because of Anita's jealousy that she had pronounced a death sentence upon Kate.

Ted was left entirely alone in the chamber of the cave for over an hour, and, during that time, he had striven in vain to think of some plan for saving Kate.

He reflected upon the probability of his friends, Bud Morgan, Ben Tremont and the others, arriving in time to aid him in escaping and saving the girl from her terrible fate.

Ted had attended carefully to the distribution of the cotton pieces from his handkerchiefs. He had left a plain trail of them right up to the rocks near the entrance to the cave.

He knew that the rough riders would follow quickly, and he knew they would have little difficulty in following the trail.

But when they came to the deep chasm where the bridge had been they would be delayed.

In his hurry and in the darkness Ted had not thoroughly investigated conditions at the chasm. He did not know whether his friends could find some way of crossing or not, but he was willing to rely upon the ingenuity of Bud Morgan or Ben Tremont to find some way of getting across to him.

As Ted summed up these possibilities, things seemed brighter to him. He would stake everything upon the chance that his friends would come to his aid in time to save his life and that of the girl, and, in the meantime, he would use his ingenuity to put off the intended murders.

Ted's thoughts were finally interrupted by the appearance of Anita herself in the chamber. In her hand the girl carried a lantern. Ted had previously been in total darkness.

Anita's countenance was a trifle paler than Ted had ever seen it before.

There was no gleam of triumph in her eyes. She appeared to have been weeping. Thre was a troubled expression upon her face.

As she entered the room she held the lantern as high as possible and turned its rays full upon the face of the young rough rider.

"Is it, indeed, you, Ted Strong?" she asked.

"Yes," was Ted's answer.

"I have come for a last talk with you, señor," began

the girl. "Miguel has informed you that you are to die?"

"Yes," replied Ted, "but I hardly credited his words. I was to hear the news from your own lips."

Anita set the lantern upon the floor and then squatted upon the ground, facing the young rough rider. She looked him over silently for several moments as if fascinated with his appearance.

Then she sighed.

"I hardly know what to say to you," she finally remarked, "but I felt as if I must see you alone, as if I must hear you talk once more before you are put to death."

Ted made no answer.

"Do you know why I have determined that you shall die?" she suddenly asked.

"No," said Ted. "Anita, you are an enigma to me. You have puzzled me more than any woman I have ever met. I believed that you were sincere when you announced your determination to go away from these wilds, to try to lead a new life, to become a respectable, honest woman. It pained me to learn that you were merely acting. What could have been your motive for that deception? Why did you leave that note behind when you left the hotel at Soccoro? Can you answer these questions?"

"Yes, and I will," answered Anita, with sudden determination, "and I will speak the truth."

Ted looked searchingly at the girl's face. There was a look upon it that Ted had never seen there before. He believed that Anita was about to tell a straight story.

"You know, Ted Strong, that I love you. It is a love, burning in its intensity, such a love as only a girl of my birth, my temperament, can feel. It is a love, which, if unsatisfied, can end only in a violent death. I hoped against hope to make you return my affections. I knew in my heart that you could never love me. I tried to control my passion, but fire might be easier quenched by pouring gasoline upon it.

"When you talked to me of my trying to lead a different life, your words appealed to me. I consented to go with you and your friends to Texas to start life anew. I made the promise with every intention of keeping it. But I was not anxious to become an honest woman for my own sake; that is, simply because it was the right thing for me to do. No, my scheme was to go to Texas, to lead an exemplary life, to appear to forsake all my evil ways—all for one great purpose. It was for the purpose of sometime compelling you to love me. My mind was made up to make you marry me.

"When I left the band I left them with every intention of not returning. I told all the men why I was leaving and where I was going. There were some objections made, some entreaties for me to remain, but I was not forcibly held. At the last moment I agreed to meet Miguel, one of my men, clandestinely in the woods near the hotel in Soccoro to bid him a last farewell. The signal agreed upon was the hoot of a night owl. I remained dressed and awake to answer his signal, and when it came I slipped through my window and went into the woods.

"There, with Miguel, were three other men. I was seized by them, bound and brought back to this cave. The moment after I was seized you appeared upon the scene. I saw two of my men knock you senseless, but I had no chance to aid you. While the men were hurriedly examining your wound, to see if you were dead, I took from my pockets a small tablet, wrote a short note to you, and, with my hat pin, secured it to the trunk of a tree. You doubtlessly found it later?"

Here Anita paused for Ted to reply.

The young rough rider nodded.

"For hours my men pleaded with me to promise to remain with them as their queen," continued Anita, "but I steadfastly refused, hoping that they would finally release me or that you would come to my assistance. Then, finally, Miguel arrived with this girl, whom he kidnaped from the stage while she was en route to join you at Soccoro."

"Join me?"

The question was asked in a tone of great surprise.

"Certainly," replied Anita. "When I learned from Miguel that she was your sweetheart, I changed my plans immediately. There came over me in full force the realization that I could never become your wife. My former suspicions were true. Another woman had already caught your heart. I made up my mind instantly that she must die. Then I determined that you must also die. But this is not all. To no one have I confided what I am now about to tell you. The moment that your last breath expires I will also have breathed my last. Life can hold no inducements for me now. I have prepared a powerful drug, a poison, which shall pass my lips the moment I have given the command which shall end your existence!"

For a moment there was silence, and then Ted spoke. His tone was calm, low and assuring.

He told the girl of her terrible mistake in thinking that Kate Doland was his sweetheart. He told her that he had never even seen the girl. He even went into details, told her all about the plot of the girl's father to make her marry the man, Gaylord. He told her about the girl's affianced husband, Frank Cooper. Then he pleaded with Anita to reconsider her plans.

But Anita was not quite convinced that what Ted had said was true.

She looked at him with a doubtful expression upon her face. At last she said:

"I would like to believe what you say, señor, but it is not quite possible. You are ingenious. You are artful. Perhaps this story has been made up in your clever mind."

"At least give me an opportunity to prove that I have told the truth," said Ted.

This remark set Anita to thinking.

For a long time she sat with head bowed low, as if in deep consultation with herself. Several times she nodded her head emphatically.

But at last she glanced up quickly with an animated countenance, and exclaimed:

"You are right. You should be given a chance to prove the truth. I will soon know if you are this girl's lover, and, at the same time, give you a chance for your life!"

Ted looked inquiringly at the girl.

"I will give you an opportunity to become a member of my secret clan!" she exclaimed.

CHAPTER X.

THE MARK OF BROTHERHOOD.

"I will give you a chance to become a member of my secret clan!"

With this startling exclamation Anita jumped suddenly to her feet and hastily left the chamber. She was gone probably fifteen minutes.

In that time Ted had hardly had an opportunity to analyze the thoughts which had crowded his mind.

He had hardly recovered from the surprise caused by the startling proposition from the Mexican girl bandit.

When Anita returned she was accompanied by three members of her band. They were big, strong-appearing men.

Without a word, evidently having been previously instructed, they advanced to where the young rough rider was sitting and severed the cords which bound his feet. Then they raised him to a standing position.

From about his waist one of the men took a silken sash, and, after folding it several times, he tied it tightly over Ted's eyes.

Then Ted found himself suddenly lifted off his feet by two of the men and being carried away.

Ted, of course, had no idea as to where he was being taken, but from the clatter of the men's feet he knew that they were trodding continually along a rocky floor, and he suspected that he was merely being taken to some other part of the cave. In this he was correct.

Finally the men who were carrying the young rough rider laid their burden on the floor. Ted could not see anything, but he could hear a muffled, whispered conversation between the men and Anita. But he could not distinguish any of the words.

Then all was quiet. He seemed to have been left alone again.

For half an hour all was quiet. Then he heard footsteps in the apartment, as if a dozen or more persons were marching around and around in a circle.

Then he felt himself seized and lifted up again by several pairs of strong hands.

This time Ted was carried only a few steps before being again lowered to the floor in a sitting posture.

Then he heard the voice of Anita speaking:

"Men of the inner council, chosen members of my band, there is solemn work ahead of you this night. A candidate for membership is with us. Allow me to introduce him. He is Ted Strong. By a special order of your queen this man is to be initiated into the rites of our clan without the usual preliminaries.

"The candidate is as brave as he is handsome. He is recommended to membership in this order by myself. He will be given all of the crucial tests through which you, yourselves, individually, passed to gain your present membership, and, in addition, in consequence of being spared the preliminaries usually required of candidates, he will be also given an additional test to prove his loyalty toward myself, your queen.

"Now, before the initiation begins, if there be one of your number who has any reason why this man should not be admitted, let him speak or hereafter forever hold his peace."

Anita paused, as if waiting for an answer, and another voice, that of one of her men, broke the silence:

"Most august queen, are we to understand that it is your desire that this man should become a member of our secret clan?"

"Yes," was the answer.

"Then be it as you desire," returned the man. "Your slightest wish is our greatest pleasure, Anita."

"Then we will proceed," exclaimed the queen. "Bring forth the seal of brotherhood, that the candidate may first be branded!"

During this time Ted had not spoken, but now he ventured to speak.

Addressing Anita, he asked: "Is it your intention to make me a member of this band against my will?"

"You asked for a chance to prove that the girl whom we hold in captivity is not your sweetheart. I am granting that request, and, at the same time, am giving you a chance for your life," returned Anita.

"But how do you know that I wish a chance for my life, if such a chance necessitates my joining this band of criminals?"

As Ted asked this question, he heard murmurs of disapproval from Anita's men.

One of them spoke up:

"Queen Anita," he said, "it is not customary for us to admit men to this order who do not wish to join."

"Quite true," returned Anita; "but this is a case quite out of the ordinary. We have before us a man who, if he wishes, will be a very valuable addition to our company. He is a man of genius, of many resources. While he does not now, perhaps, wish to become a member, he may later be persuaded to wear the harness. Of one thing I am certain. Whatever oaths or promises he may make he will keep. He has one alternative. Should he fail in the tests about to be imposed upon him and refuse to join this company, death awaits him. If he prefers death, well and good."

Then, turning toward Ted, the girl continued:

"I will give you five minutes to make up your mind which you prefer, death or to be initiated into this secret clan."

It was indeed a desperate situation in which the young rough rider found himself.

It seemed to the young rough rider at first that he had to choose between death and dishonor.

But in the five minutes allotted to him he turned everything over and over in his mind.

Why should he choose death when a slight chance of life was open to him? Would it be dishonorable for him under these desperate circumstances to make false promises to these desperadoes for the purpose of saving his life? He thought not.

Life was sweet to Ted Strong. It seemed to him that he had but just commenced to live. He was young. Many years were before him.

Then, again, he thought, perhaps, by consenting to join the band, he could be of service to the girl, Kate, whom Anita seemed determined to put to death.

Another thought also came to the young rough rider.

If he should refuse now, point-blank, to join the bandits, his death would not be long deferred. If he consented to join them, time would be gained and his friends might arrive before the ceremonies were finished.

At the expiration of the five minutes Ted told the Mexican girl to proceed with the work of initiation.

Hardly had the words of consent passed his lips when Ted was suddenly seized by the wrist and his coat and shirt sleeves were rolled up nearly to the elbow of the right arm.

There came a ringing cry from every voice present, and one word was spoken in a chorus:

"Brother!"

At the same moment there came a painful, blistering, burning sensation on the right forearm, and a quick jerk had removed the blind from his eyes.

Ted's first glance was toward his injured arm.

Upon the fleshy part of his arm was a rising blister, a red ring about the size of the rim of an American dollar, and, within the ring, the outline of a sand scorpion.

Ted had been branded! Upon his arm had been burned the mark of brotherhood, proclaiming him to be a member of the band of bandits known as the Coahuila Demons!

But, although Ted was now a member, he soon found that the initiation was not finished. There was more to follow of a much more terrible nature.

CHAPTER XI.

TED'S TERRIBLE TEST.

After ascertaining the nature of the brand upon his arm, Ted looked up to examine his surroundings.

He found himself in a brilliantly lighted chamber in the far interior of the cave.

The chamber was large and roomy, and was lighted by means of many torches, placed closely together in rows on the walls near the ceiling.

He was seated upon the floor in the center of a large circle of squatting forms, grotesquely dressed.

There were sixteen of these forms in all.

They were seated, tailor fashion, upon the floor of the cave, which was richly carpeted with thick, heavy rugs. No other furniture was visible.

Ted noted, with surprise, the strange manner in which the bandits were attired.

Over the head of each, hanging loosely to the knees, had he been standing, was a bright, red mantle made of some fine texture.

On the feet of each were buckskin shoes, laced from the ankles to the knees.

The arms of these grotesquely attired individuals extended through slits in their red robes.

Their faces were all hidden by the mantles, but there were holes cut in the red cloth for the eyes.

Ted could not tell which of the sixteen persons was Anita. She was disguised like the rest, but he was soon able to pick her out, for very soon she spoke:

"Ted Strong, you are now a member of this band, but you are not yet eligible to be trusted with the secrets of the clan. You have not yet received the tests which, if passed by you in a creditable manner, will entitle you to the full confidences of your queen. Are you ready to proceed further?"

"Yes," replied the young rough rider.

"Then your abilities with the pistols and bowie knives must first be tried."

At a motion from Anita two men rose from their positions and advanced to Ted and handed him his own pistols.

As the weapons were thrust into his hands, Ted's first thought was to turn the revolvers upon his enemies and make an endeavor to fight his way out of the crowd.

But, looking about, he saw that every person in the circle had him already covered. It would be useless to fight.

He was in the center of a complete circle. His back, necessarily, was always toward half of his enemies. He could not hope to live a second after he had fired his first shot.

Ted was requested to show his marksmanship. A number of ingenious devices for practice shots were introduced, and every shot made by the young rough rider elicited murmurs of approbation and surprise from the judging members of the bandit gang.

When Anita was seemingly satisfied with his shooting abilities, she told Ted to put his revolvers away in his own belt. Then Anita said:

"I hope to find, Ted Strong, that you are equally adept with the bowie knife as with the revolver. That will be your next test and the most crucial one which will be imposed upon you. If you fail in this coming test, your life must pay the forfeit!"

Then, turning to the two men, who had previously handed Ted the revolvers, Anita gave some directions in her native tongue.

They again advanced toward Ted.

"You may remain standing, señor," said one of them, "but we must again blind your eyes for a few minutes."

Ted submitted to their once more tying the silken sash over his eyes.

Then he felt something thrust into his hand. He knew by the touch of it that it was a bowie knife.

He wondered why he had been blindfolded, but he had but a moment or two to speculate.

He could hear sounds indicating that some of the bandits were moving about, and he heard some object being dragged across the floor and inside the circle.

Then some one from behind him quickly tore the sash from his eyes.

Ted's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

Seated before him upon the floor and gazing up at him with a wild, startled expression, was a young and beautiful girl.

She was stylishly dressed in a close-fitting, dark blue skirt, and a light-colored shirt-waist. Her feet were encased in fashionable, high-heeled shoes.

Her black hair hung loosely to the floor.

Ted knew instantly that she must be the girl whom Miguel and his assistants had kidnaped from the Soccoro stage, Kate Doland, the daughter of the Philadelphia broker, but he wondered for what purpose Anita had caused the girl to be thus placed before him.

Of course Kate had no knowledge of the young rough rider. She did not know but what Ted was the leader of the bandits.

She saw the gleaming knife in his hand.

She believed that her last moment of life had come. She thought that Ted was about to kill her.

As he noted her presence, Ted involuntarily leaned over to whisper some reassuring statement to the girl.

Taking his action for a hostile advance, the girl, with a shriek of terror upon her lips, fell back from a sitting position, but caught herself with her hands before falling clear to the floor.

Thus, half sitting and half reclining, she continued to gaze at the young rough rider with a terrified look in her eyes and an expression of great fear upon her pallid face.

Ted glanced toward the circle of bandits.

Every individual in the circle had a revolver in his right hand, and the revolvers were all pointed straight at the young rough rider.

Just as Ted leaned over toward the girl, there came a quick and startling sentence from the lips of Anita:

"Now, Ted Strong, the moment has come when you can prove that you do not love the señorita before you, and, at the same time, you can show us what skill you may have with the bowie knife. Your greatest test is now before you. It will determine whether or not you are made of the stuff we wish to take into our bandit band.

"No man can wear the mark of brotherhood, such as has been placed upon your arm, and live, who refuses to obey implicitly each and every order of the queen.

"Remember, you must either obey the command I am about to give, or instantly you will be shot down like a dog!"

Turning toward her men, Anita asked:

"Brothers, are you ready?"

"Yes," was answered in a chorus of fifteen voices.

"Keep the candidate well covered, and be prepared to do your duty should he hesitate one instant," commanded the girl. Then to Ted:

"You are to kill the girl before you with that knife! This will be your test with the bowie knife. If you accomplish the trick with one thrust of the knife, you will receive a mark denoting that you are fairly expert. If your first thrust penetrates her heart you will be considered perfect. Be ready!"

As Anita's cruel, fiendish words were heard, the girl, Kate, uttered an agonizing cry.

"Oh, save me! Save me!" she implored, looking to Ted.

Ted's face turned deathly white.

He had had many thrilling adventures, but had never had such a terrible experience as was now before him.

He had been commanded to take the life of an innocent girl in cold blood! The price of his refusal was to be his own life!

But Ted needed no reflections to come to a decision of what would be his course in this instance.

"Ready!"

Anita's voice rang out, cruel and clear.

"Now, strike!"

The fatal command had come. Ted wavered. His form shook like an aspen leaf. A thousand thoughts, entirely foreign to the matter at hand, flooded his brain. He seemed to be growing dizzy.

All around him in a circle there seemed to be moving rapidly a single face. Just a face—no body, no hair—a face upon the countenance of which seemed to be pictured agony, fear, despair! It was the face of the beautiful girl whom he had been commanded to murder.

Then the vision was suddenly dispelled. He seemed to be suddenly caught from a whirlpool of fanciful illusion and returned to the place where he had formerly been standing.

It had been but a moment, hardly more than three seconds, since Anita had given her command, but it seemed to Ted as if hours had passed.

He wondered why he had not been shot for disobeying the command.

He wondered if he had been shot. Perhaps he was now present only in the spirit.

Then he heard the clear tones of the Mexican girl again:

"Be quick, young man. To refuse means death for you! This is your great test. You must stab the girl to the heart!"

The girl's voice helped to collect Ted's scattered senses.

He suddenly straightened up and threw the gleaming knife far across the chamber of the cave.

And, at the same time, he fell flat to the ground.

There were sixteen deafening reports, but for the second, at least, Ted's strategy had saved his life!

He had dropped to the floor just in time!

The bullets passed over his head!

The bandits, seeing that Ted had not been killed, began springing to their feet to rush upon him.

At that second there came a piercing scream from Anita.

Ted looked quickly toward the place where the bandit queen had been sitting.

Her face was terribly distorted with pain.

In her hand she held a small, empty, glass vial.

Even as Ted looked, her eyes rolled wildly for a second or two, and then she fell heavily backward to the floor!

Forgetting Ted in the excitement, the bandits rushed to the aid of their dying queen.

With great presence of mind, quick to think and quick to act, Ted Strong stooped and picked the American girl up in his strong arms, then quickly and noiselessly started to the rear of the chamber, toward what appeared to be the entrance to a passage leading to some other room.

Ted had gained the narrow passage and had just set the girl upon her feet so that they might travel more quickly, when he heard a succession of angry exclamations behind him.

He glanced quickly around.

The enraged bandits had discovered his attempt to escape! They were rushing toward him!

CHAPTER XII.

AN EXPLOSION.

When the young rough rider saw his enemies rushing toward him, he drew his revolvers and faced them for an instant.

It looked as if Ted had determined to fight the whole gang.

But that was not his purpose. Ted hoped to hold the villains in check for a moment to give Kate a chance to escape.

As he stopped he hurriedly pushed the girl further into the passage and said:

"Keep up your courage, Miss Doland, and run down the passage as fast as possible while I try to keep your enemies in check."

If Kate was surprised at hearing the young rough rider address her by her own name, she had no time to comment upon it. She gave one glance at the resolute face of the handsome, young man, and then hastened to obey his direction.

She turned and hurried down the dark corridor.

Then, as the bandits came near, Ted pressed both triggers of his revolvers, which were extended directly toward the onrushing desperadoes.

The passage was filled instantly with smoke from the discharged weapons, and Ted turned and ran swiftly in the direction taken by the girl.

Ted heard several distressed groans, and knew that his bullets had found victims among the bandits, but he did not stop to see whether or not any of the desperadoes had been killed or mortally wounded.

He had taken no definite aim when he had fired. He hoped that his bullets had killed none of his foes. Ted never liked to take a human life if it could be avoided. His purpose in firing was to confuse his enemies and check their progress momentarily.

Ted had succeeded in that purpose.

Blinded by the sudden fire and the dense smoke, the desperadoes had stopped their mad rush.

Ted was running swiftly toward where Kate had retreated, when there suddenly came a blinding flash and the sound of a mighty explosion of some sort!

The ground beneath the feet of the young rough rider seemed to rock backward and forward.

The walls of the passage trembled and seemed about to cave in.

The noise was deafening. Ted was in the act of placing his hands to his ears, when he suddenly stubbed his toe against an unevenness in the floor, and fell headlong in the passage.

Ted knew no more!

The young rough rider had fallen with terrible force, and his head had struck the rocky floor of the passage when he fell.

He had been rendered senseless.

It was a long time afterward before Ted finally regained consciousness.

As he opened his eyes he found himself gazing into the face of the young American girl—Kate Doland.

The girl was seated upon the stone floor of the passage and was holding Ted's head in her lap.

Her eyes were red and swollen. She had been weeping.

As Ted opened his eyes, a joyful expression escaped her lips.

"Thank God, you live!" she exclaimed. "I thought you were dead!"

Ted was very weak, but he summoned all his strength and rose to a sitting posture.

Stuck in a crack of the rocks, which composed one wall of the passage, was a burning torch.

"Where did you get the light?" was Ted's first question.

"I found it on the floor a few yards from here," an-

swered the girl, "and I found some matches in one of your pockets. You must pardon me for being so bold in looking for them, but I was afraid that you had either been killed or seriously wounded. If the latter, I longed to be of some service to you."

"You did quite right," answered Ted. "Now you must tell me of what happened after I lost consciousness. Where are the bandits? Did they not follow us?"

"First, let me thank you for saving my life," exclaimed Kate. "You are the bravest man I ever have known."

"Hush," returned Ted. "It was nothing. There are many brave men in this world, braver than I, I suppose, when you come to know them. We both had narrow escapes, and we are probably still in great danger. Can you answer the questions I asked?"

"No," replied the girl. "I cannot tell you what became of the bandits after the explosion, but they certainly did not follow us."

"Tell me what happened," said the young rough rider. "Do you remember the terrible noise?"

"Yes; it was an explosion of some sort—dynamite or giant powder, probably. It was right after that that I tripped upon something and fell."

"I was dazed by the terrible noise and the quivering of the passage," continued Kate, "but I heard your body as it fell. I was several rods further down the passage. I was afraid to walk back this way at first in the darkness, but I finally crawled back on my hands and knees. It was thus that I happened to find the torch. Then, a moment later, I found your inanimate body. I was afraid you were dead. I began feeling in your pockets for a match, and found several of them in the second pocket in which I looked. Then I lighted the torch. You were so still and your features were so white that I was certain you were dead. Your eyes were wide open, but the pupils were almost hidden from view, your eyeballs being drawn up. Your eyes looked ghastly and dead.

"I sat down upon the floor and took your head in my lap, resolved to thus guard you until we were found by either friends or foes. Then, after several unsuccessful attempts, I managed to close your eyes. A few moments later you returned to consciousness."

"Now," said Ted, "we must investigate and find some way of getting out of this passage. I wonder why the bandits did not continue their pursuit of us. Let's take the torch and find out, if possible."

As he spoke, Ted took the torch in his hand and started along the passage toward the chamber, where his initiation into the secret clan had been taking place a short time before.

He rounded a short turn, and a sudden exclamation of surprise passed his lips.

He held the torchlight high above his head.

A strange sight met his view.

At the point where the passage had entered the chamber the roof of the corridor had caved in as a result of the explosion, and the passage was entirely choked with large, broken pieces of rock.

This, then, explained why Ted and the girl had not been pursued by the bandits. The explosion, coming just at that time, had probably saved their lives.

Briefly Ted explained the situation to Kate.

Then, as he turned to follow the passage in the other direction, he said: "Miss Doland, you are doubtlessly wondering who I am, how I come to be here at this time, and how I come to know your name so readily. Is that not so?"

"You are right," replied the pretty girl, "and I was intending to ask you some questions when a suitable time presented itself."

Ted halted.

"I will tell you all the particulars right now," said Ted, "before we go any further. We may have some hard times yet before getting out of the power of these villains, and I may not get a better chance to tell you these things."

Then Ted told the girl all about his meeting with her father, Caspar Gaylord and her lover, Frank Cooper. He told her about the confidence Cooper had imposed in him by telling him the whole story of his courtship of the girl and of the difficulties that had been thrown in their way by the father.

He also told the girl of how he had followed her father and Gaylord, led by Miguel, to the cave, and of his expectation of soon being rescued by his rough riders and other friends.

"And when my friends arrive," concluded Ted, "Frank Cooper will be with them."

Ted's recital had a good effect upon the girl. Her spirits rose as he continued, and the hope of eventually being rescued grew strong in her breast.

She tried to express her thanks to the young rough rider for all that he had done in her behalf, but Ted did not permit her to say much along that line.

However, Kate corroborated all that Frank had told him about her father's persecution of her.

When the two had finished exchanging these confidences, Ted, followed by the girl, continued the travel down the passage, lighting their way with the torch.

The passage seemed to be quite a long one—much longer than Ted had at first suspected.

It was winding. At last the young rough rider passed a short bend and found himself just entering another large chamber in the heart of the mountain.

As he moved the torch about to examine every part of this big room he heard Kate suddenly exclaim:

"My father is here!"

A second later, moving his torch backward a little, Ted discovered two dark forms in one corner of the cave.

They were bound, hand and foot, and were lying upon the stone floor not far apart.

They were Jeremiah Doland, the broker, and his would-be son-in-law, Caspar Gaylord.

CHAPTER XIII.

TED'S BLUFF.

"Oh, my daughter, my daughter!"

This was the exclamation with which Jeremiah Doland greeted the girl by Ted's side, as they entered the large chamber in the rocks.

Ted held the torch so that the rays fell full upon the two helplessly bound prisoners.

There was a great change in the appearance of each of the men since Ted had last seen them.

The pompous, self-complacent look had vanished from the face of the rich broker. There were new lines upon his fat face—lines of anxiety.

Doland had been "eating humble pie" since Ted had conversed with him.

There were just as noticeable changes in the countenance of Caspar Gaylord. The man appeared to have just gone through a severe illness. His cheeks were sunken. His eyes, before bright and gleaming with a crafty expression; were now lusterless. His spirit had been broken.

As Jeremiah eagerly called out to his daughter, Kate rushed toward him.

She fell upon her knees in front of him.

In his present distress her generous heart forgot all the sufferings she had gone through on his account.

With joyful words she told him that he would soon be free. She told him of the terrible experiences she had gone through and of how Ted Strong had rescued her.

With graphic language she informed her father how the young rough rider had refused to kill her to save his own life, and had, single-handed, defied a whole crowd of the bandits, who were at the time covering him with their revolvers.

As she finished, the face of the old broker was turned toward Ted.

"Young man," he said, "I cannot express the gratitude I have in my heart for you. And I owe to you a very humble apology for the manner in which I spurned your offer to help me find my daughter. You were right and I was wrong. Never before, until within the last few hours, did I realize just how much I love my daughter. I have had plenty of time for reflection. I can now realize how cruel I was to her, how thoughtless. I would have endeavored to ruin her happiness for life merely to insure myself against financial loss. Let me tell you all about it, Mr. Strong. I feel as if a full confession would, to some extent, ease my mind."

Ted's answer was to step forward and take Doland by the hand with a warm clasp.

Ted uttered no word, but his act was more suggestive of his feelings than any words could have been.

Doland knew that the young rough rider respected him for the stand he was now taking. Doland had put aside his patronizing airs. He felt really and truly glad to gain Ted's approval. From that minute there was a warm spot in his heart for the young rough rider.

And later, as he learned to know more and more of Ted, his respect and affection for the young rough rider increased a hundredfold.

"As you may know, I have been credited with being a shrewd business man," began Doland. "I have been successful and have amassed a large fortune—how large I can only estimate.

"But, like other men, noted for their business shrewdness, I became overconfident. I made a mistake, mistake whereby this man, Casper Gaylord, ingeniously persuaded me to sign a paper, which gives him the power to seize almost every dollar and investment I have in the world.

"When I first realized the situation I nearly lost my mind. I expected to be turned out of house and home. I realized that at my age I could never hope to rebuild

my fortune. Nothing would be left but poverty. Then came this man to me with a proposition. If I would persuade Kate to become his wife he would give me back the fatal paper. I yielded to him. I feared his threats.

"Then came the knowledge that Kate had already promised secretly to become the wife of another man —a poor man. Frank Cooper has probably told you how I treated him.

"It was not because I disliked Cooper that I refused to let Kate marry him. It was because I must make Kate marry Gaylord or lose my fortune.

"Thank God, I can see things differently now. The old greed is all past. From now on I have only Kate's happiness in view and my great hope is that she may escape from this infernal place and reach the man she loves. I want to see her happily married, and am willing to accept the poverty."

While Doland had been speaking, Ted had been working to free him from his bonds. It was slow work, for Ted had been deprived of his hunting knife when first captured by the brigands.

But he finally succeeded in loosening the knots.

As Doland finished speaking, Ted said a few words approving the course Doland was taking, and then he turned to Gaylord.

There was a searching, meaning look in Ted's eyes as they met those of Gaylord.

"And how is it with you?" Ted asked.

"What do you mean?" asked Gaylord.

"Are you willing to give up this girl?"

"It looks as if I would have to whether I am willing to or not," answered the man, with a forced smile, which was very faint indeed.

Ted turned to Doland.

"Mr. Doland, was it by fair, square business methods that this man obtained your signature to that important paper?" he asked.

"No, it was not," was Doland's emphatic answer, and then he proceeded to tell Ted all the particulars of the deal.

These particulars were somewhat complicated, and would not be of particular interest to the reader. Let it suffice to say that the scheme of Gaylord's involved some very crooked work, which, if investigated by the government, would probably have resulted in placing Gaylord behind the iron bars of a State's prison for a considerable number of years.

But, had this transaction been investigated, there were circumstances which would have made the affair look exceedingly bad for Doland, also.

But Ted believed the story just as Doland had told it. As far as matters connected with the deal were concerned, Ted believed that Doland, at heart, intended no wrongdoing; nothing illegal. He had simply been cleverly duped by the young man.

Arriving at this conclusion, Ted believed he would be right in resorting to a line of action in the interests of Doland and his daughter.

He had resolved to "bluff" Gaylord into giving up that paper.

When Doland had finished talking, Ted turned suddenly toward Gaylord and said:

"Would you like to get out of this place alive?"

Ted's question seemed to convey a hidden threat.

Gaylord's face turned pale.

"Hurry up. Give me an answer," said Ted.

"Why, y-yes," faltered the man.

"I can probably help you to get out," said Ted.

"T-thank y-you," returned Gaylord, apparently not knowing what he was saying.

"But there is only one condition upon which I will promise to aid you or allow others to aid you," continued Ted.

Gaylord did not answer.

"Well, don't you want to know what that condition is?" asked Ted.

"W-why, y-yes," the man stammered again.

"Then it is that you instantly turn over to me the paper which you have just heard Mr. Doland tell me about," returned the young rough rider, in a determined voice.

For several moments Gaylord made no answer. Then he replied:

"I have not the paper with me."

"All right," replied Ted, springing to his feet. "That lets you out. It is very unfortunate for you that you did not bring it with you, for now we must leave you to your fate."

Ted turned to Doland and Kate. He gave them a suggestive wink as he spoke, and then they knew instantly that he was "springing a bluff" upon Gaylord.

"If you two are ready we will make our way out of the cave."

At this suggestion he started to move away toward the corridor, and Doland and Kate followed him.

Seeing himself apparently about to be deserted, Gaylord suddenly weakened

"Come back here, Ted Strong. I will cave. You will find that paper in a long, leather wallet in my inside waistcoat pocket."

There was a gleam of triumph in Ted's eyes as he quickly approached Gaylord's side and began loosening his bonds.

As soon as the man was freed, Ted reminded him of the paper which he had promised to turn over.

The paper was soon in the hands of the young rough rider.

Not glancing at it himself, Ted held it before Doland and asked:

"Is that the document we want?"

"Yes," came an instant answer.

Ted held the document to the flame of his torch, and, when it had caught fire, he dropped it to the floor of the cave. A moment later nothing but ashes remained of the paper, which had come so near ruining the lives of two young people—Kate Doland and Frank Cooper.

The last barrier was removed which prevented their being happily married—that is, should the girl succeed in escaping from the cave occupied by the Coahuila Demons.

A quick examination of the room in which Ted and Kate had found Doland and Gaylord, told Ted that there was no other exit than the passage through which they had traveled to reach the chamber.

This discovery brought a startling revelation.

The explosion had not only saved their lives from the hands of the bandits, but it had also closed up the only exit from the passage!

There was only one thing to do.

Return quickly to the spot where the passage had been choked and ascertain if it could be cleared of the débris.

They were soon hurrying along in that direction.

As they approached the spot where the explosion had taken place, Ted's sensitive ears heard sounds on the opposite side of the pile of loose rocks which choked the passage.

Men were at work on the other side clearing away the débris.

CHAPTER XIV.

FOLLOWING THE TRAIL OF COTTON.

After parting with Ted Strong in Dragon Pass, after they had listened to the interview between Miguel and the two Philadelphians, Doland and Gaylord, Ralph Hobart lost no time in making his way back to camp.

He found that Bud Morgan and Max Morton had already returned from their hunt for game.

They had found some birds closer to camp, and when Ralph arrived supper was prepared.

Most of the party were already eating.

Quickly he singled out Ben Tremont and Bud Morgan and told them of the discovery made by Ted and himself, and of the fact that Ted had started off to trail Miguel.

Then he delivered Ted's instructions for the rest of the party to follow him as quickly as possible, explaining Ted's scheme of leaving a plain trail behind of pieces torn from his blue cotton handkerchiefs.

Hobart snatched a few bites of food while the others were getting their horses saddled in readiness for the journey.

Then he guided them to the place where the young rough rider had taken up the trail. They easily found where Ted had commenced to drop the "scent," as Ben Tremont called the cotton pieces.

The moon was now out full and strong, and it was found that Ted's trail could be followed at a slow pace without even dismounting.

As fast as possible the party, headed by Ben and Bud, pushed along. But they could not go as fast as they wished.

Eventually, however, they arrived at the entrance to the canyon, leading into the mountains.

Here a short consultation was held and it was decided that the stage driver, who still continued with the party, should be left behind with Max Morton, to guard the horses, while the rest of the party proceeded on foot up the canyon.

Bud Morgan was walking rapidly along ahead of his companions and was the first to discover the chasm.

He knew not what to make of it at first, as there were no evidences of a bridge.

Considerable time was spent investigating the place.

They could see where horse's hoofs had advanced right up to the edge of the chasm and had then, evidently, stepped off into space.

"By ther great horned toads," exclaimed Bud Morgan, finally. "It's a cinch they ain't no horse thet could jump clean across thet hole. They certain must hev had a bridge of some kind here."

Then a bright plan came to Ben Tremont.

"We don't need to get any horses across," he said. "We would be glad if there was a way to get ourselves across, and I think I see one."

"What is it, Ben?" asked Bud.

"See that point of rock sticking up on the other side?"

Bud looked to where Ben was pointing.

"Yep. You're right, Ben. Don't need ter say no more. A word to ther wise is ernough, yer know. Shall I make ther throw?"

"Yes."

It took Bud but a minute or two to coil his lariat and "rope" the opposite point of rock.

The end of the lariat held by Bud was tied to a similar rock on their side of the chasm, and then, one by one, the members of the party crossed the chasm hand over hand.

To Bud's delight he soon discovered a continuation of the trail of cotton pieces on that side of the chasm.

It was now approaching daylight.

They proceeded more rapidly but also more cautiously.

Suddenly they came in sight of the column of smoke from the fire in front of the opening to the big cave.

They crept carefully up behind the big pile of rocks to the place where Ted had been overcome and made prisoner.

Ben Tremont was the first to find the chink in the rocks where he could look through.

What he saw caused his heart to beat with delight.

Three men, who had evidently been placed in front of the cave on guard, were all sleeping soundly.

Bud Morgan took a look.

They whispered together for a few seconds, and then, with a quick rush, the rough riders approached the sleeping sentinels.

They had no difficulty in overpowering the men, binding and gagging them.

Then every member of the company, followed their two intrepid leaders boldly into the cave.

They soon came across two passages, one leading upward, the other downward.

They took the passage leading downward by chance, and proceeded for a long distance into the mountain without seeing a living soul.

Had they taken the passage leading up they would eventually, if not stopped, have arrived at the chamber in which Ted Strong, at that time, was being initiated as a candidate for membership in Anita's secret clan.

As it was, they were pursuing a passage which led almost directly under that chamber.

Bud Morgan and his followers soon came to a place where the passage extended in a straight line into the mountain for several hundred feet.

Suddenly they saw ahead a man with a torch in his hand.

The man evidently saw the rough riders as soon as he had himself been seen, for he quickly drew a revolver and sent a shot down the passageway.

Happily the shot went wide of any of the party, but, at the same moment, Bud Morgan drew his weapon and fired at the man.

Bud's bullet landed in the bandit's arm, just as Bud had intended.

The injured man uttered a curse as the bullet struck him, and fell over sideways, dropping his torch among a pile of kegs as he fell.

The next second there came the terrible explosion which had walled up the passage above into which Ted and Kate had run from the pursuing bandits.

The kegs into which the bandit's torch had fallen had been partly filled with powder.

The force of the explosion had been upward, so that Bud Morgan and his friends, at the distance they were from the seat of the explosion, had not been injured.

But, of course, the bandit who had dropped the torch had been blown to atoms.

As soon as the effects of the explosion were known and the danger was past, Bud and Ben hurried their men down the passage.

They soon discovered the hole made by the terrible explosion, and climbed to the passage above.

They were right at the entrance to the chamber through which Ted Strong had experienced his terrible ordeal.

Ten of the sixteen bandits still remained in the room.

Of these three had been killed by the explosion and six were badly wounded.

From one of the wounded bandits, Ben learned, after much questioning, the direction taken by Ted.

Little by little the bandit had confessed that Ted had been in the room just before the explosion and had escaped.

Ben and his followers set at once to work to clear the passage of the broken rocks and other débris, and the

sounds made by them were the sounds heard by Ted and his companions, as stated in the last chapter.

CHAPTER XV.

CONCLUSION.

In less than two hours Ted, Kate and the two Eastern men, Doland and Gaylord, had been freed from their confinement in the narrow passage.

As Kate stepped from her prison, she found herself suddenly in the arms of Frank Cooper, her lover.

Then, with a rattling tongue, she told Frank of all that had happened to her, of how Ted had saved her from a terrible death.

She told him how Ted had forced Gaylord to give up the important document that meant so much to her father, and she also told him of her father's change of heart.

Manfully Doland approached Frank and asked to be forgiven for the way he had treated him in the past, and told the boy that he consented willingly to his union with his daughter.

It was a joyful reconciliation. Frank and his father-in-law-elect clasped hands. It was certain that from then on they would be fast friends.

Ted Strong insisted upon looking over the work of the explosion before leaving the cave, and he gave directions that all the bodies of the dead bandits should be taken out for burial.

Suddenly Ted stooped over the body of a person still clad in a red mantle.

Removing the mantle, he found himself looking upon the stilled face of Anita.

The girl was dead. She had probably died before the explosion had come.

Near her side was the empty vial.

Ted placed the mouth of the little bottle to his nostrils. He recognized the odor of a strong poison.

When she had seen that Ted would not obey her command to stab Kate, Anita had quickly given the command for her men to shoot Ted, and, at the same moment, had swallowed the poison.

To do this she had lifted the red mantle from her face. The mantle had dropped back over her face as she fell backward.

Tenderly Ted lifted the body of the small Mexican girl in his arms, and carried it out of the cave. He placed the body in the grave dug to receive it, and threw the first shovelful of dirt that covered the corpse.

The wounded bandits were taken from the cave and eventually turned over to the government authorities.

In the various chambers and passages of the cave was later found considerable booty, which had been stolen in various raids by the outlaws. These articles were advertised, and most of them were finally returned to the original owners.

Many of the bandits escaped, while Bud Morgan, Ben Tremont and the others were releasing the young rough rider and his companions, but, Anita being killed and Miguel being one of the wounded men who were captured, the gang was never reorganized.

Six weeks after the gang had been broken up, and after Ted and his friends had returned to Texas, Ted received a bulky express package from the Mexican Government.

In the package was a big reward for the work of breaking up the Coahuila Demons, which was to be divided between all who took part in the affair. Besides the big money order was a flat ebony box labeled:

"Personally for Ted Strong."

When opened it was found to contain a gold medal, suitably engraved—a personal gift to Ted from the president of the republic.

* * * * * * *

Upon invitation of Ted, the Dolands, father, mother and daughter, together with Frank Cooper, Max Morton and Ralph Hobart, accompanied the rough riders to their home in Texas.

There, at the Los Animas Ranch, they remained as visitors for over a week.

Just before the party broke up, the Los Animas Ranch house was decorated as never before. A big feast was prepared, and that evening a minister from Paco dropped in and performed a marriage ceremony which made Frank Cooper and the beautiful Katherine Doland husband and wife.

THE END.

Next week's issue of the YOUNG ROUGH RIDERS WEEKLY, No. 65, will contain an interesting story of the West, entitled "The Young Rough Riders in Shakerag Canyon; or, Routing the Rustlers of the Big Horn." It is a thrilling story of the rough life of a far Western town, and takes Ted Strong and his loyal companions into new fields. Don't fail to read No. 65, out next week.

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